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ABSTRACT

The drive for systemic reform in education reflects a widespread hunger in all sectors of society to make sense of the whole, as is shown in the increasing recognition of people in organizations of the interrelatedness of the organizations' parts. However, many attempts at systemic reform are hampered by the lack of a common view of what an educational system is, how it operates, and what the individual's role in the system is. The need for radical restructuring of public schooling in the United States is all but taken for granted and the idea of "system literacy," which asks for a much deeper understanding of how organizations function provides a useful approach to thinking through strategies to support restructuring. While there is no single definition of restructuring, some common elements are results orientation, innovative ways of reaching goals, and site-based decision-making. While some restructuring efforts have been successful, systemic reform may not be able to meet the increasing expectations for education. Elements lacking in systemic reform include a sense of urgency within school systems, a strong partnership of support, a strategic direction, and innovative methods. In addition, organizations do not easily learn because individuals view their parts as disconnected. An organization can be improved when its members develop system literacy. Steps to improve partnerships and restructuring efforts include the use of strategic planning, transforming collective bargaining, fostering system literacy, developing collaborative dialogue, and focusing on the customer. Brief responses to this paper from six educators are appended, and 23 endnotes are included. (JPT)

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Overcoming Barriers To Educational Restructuring

A CALL FOR SYSTEM LITERACY

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By Grady McGonagill, Ed.D. McGonagill & Associates

FOREWORD

Why Systems Literacy?

New concepts seemingly streak across the educational horizon every few years, gaining popularity as responses to pervasive school problems. Systemic change currently evokes that type of attention, as people in organizations increasingly sense that "everything is connected to everything else." People now perceive their work settings are made up of parts that, intentionally or unintentionally, influence one another in working toward common organizational purposes.

Recognizing that one is influenced by a system—and understanding and perceiving that system—are two wholly different issues. The concept of a holistic approach to education and to schools is not widely accepted or understood. Yet, driving today's demands for *systemic solutions* is a widespread hunger in all sectors of society to *make sense* of the "whole," to see how everything *fits*, and to find *meaning* for their individual contributions from the context of the whole. More often than not, however, these attempts at "systemic" change suffer from the *Blind Men and the Elephant* syndrome. Each makes sense of the system as he or she knows it, and then proposes changes from that perspective. There are no common mental pictures of the educational "system." As a July 1991 U.S. Department of Education study noted:

> Agreeing on a set of measures to describe the health of the education system requires broad consensus on how the various pieces of the system fit together. That consensus is elusive and certainly does not exist at present. The greatest obstacle [is]... the lack of agreement on a conceptual model of an optimally functioning education system.

This study was not the first to note the missing mental pictures of the educational "system." A year earlier, Seymour Sarason, in *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform: Can We Change Course Before It's Too Late?* noted:

> When you read the myriad of recommendations these commission reports contain, it becomes clear that they are not informed by any conception of a system. That is a charitable assessment.... those outside the system with responsibility for articulating a program for reform have nothing resembling a holistic conception of the system they seek to influence.

Understanding the schooling "elephant." The nature of human perception is at the heart of this problem. Our understanding of the organizational system in which we work derives largely from personal experience, and few roles in the schooling process allow direct experience with school *systems*. At the most, we experience only systems of schools. Clearly, there is a need for a common understanding of the schooling "elephant"—the minimum, viable system of relationships for responding to the learning needs of children.

An example of looking at only one piece of a system is the growing fascination with site-based decision making or management. This concept seeks to unleash the creativity that groups of workers can contribute to their organization in order to achieve better results. But in their zeal to implement such a concept, many schools have failed to consider the general system's capability to support such a "radical" realignment of what seems like decision-making "power."

Site-based management, by itself, is not a systemic approach. In many cases, it has an opposite, fragmenting effect. The applications of site-based management deal largely with *control* of decisions—who makes what decisions and when—rather than *support* of decisions—what expertise, experience, and other information is needed for effective decisions—by whom and when. This latter approach to site-based management also deals with power, but it does not emphasize *who* has the power. Instead, this approach acknowledges that everyone has personal power that is applied through his or her daily choices of how to respond to immediate needs.

The system's responsibility is to inform, align, and connect the personal power of everyone in the system for effective, *permanent* change.

Systemic change requires systemic solutions. Unfortunately, this realignment cannot be achieved in a piecemeal, school-by-school fashion. From the history of "educational change," we know that a dramatic, and even systematic, change is not necessarily "systemic" change. Various roles and structural relationships (teachers, principals, central office personnel) continue to be [illegible]ed out in traditional terms. Practitioners, with already-full plates of tra[illegible]onal functions, are expected to change behavior to perform new functions without the support required for this type of fundamental relearning. Individuals are expected to change without parallel changes in the system's capacity to support them.

Systemic change acknowledges reality—everything is connected to everything else! What we do in individual classrooms is not isolated from what we do as entire faculties and districts. Likewise, changing curriculum without changing assessment will not likely effect any permanent change. And considering the philosophy of student assessment without considering

the system's philosophy of personnel appraisal simply fails to acknowledge the relationship between how one treats others with how one is treated. Where it all "comes together" is in the ongoing decision making of the people on the line. Ultimately, everyone's efforts are encapsulated in a "moment of truth"—in education, the interaction between learner and teacher.

"Systems thinking" is the bedrock—in fact, the *only* place—from which effective, permanent change can emerge. In other words, we must understand the connectedness of work systems that shape our roles before we can "restructure" them to support mutual purposes. Yet, today, even some who think they understand that education is a system, may have trouble seeing it as a *manageable* entity with boundaries and connected processes. For schools to be improvable, they first must be seen as manageable systems. This requires understanding how seemingly isolated acts are parts of linked processes even though separated by time or space.

These types of understandings are no less a problem in the corporate world where system boundaries, inputs, and outputs seem more clearly defined. For this reason, both public and private sector management have been increasingly interested in *systems thinking* and *systems literacy*, as evidenced by the focus on systems understanding in W. Edwards Deming's *System of Profound Knowledge* and the popularity of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*.

Literacy traditionally is an educational concept and may seem out of place when applied to understanding organizations as connected, functioning systems. But it is appropriately applied to this situation because it addresses needs for a basic foundation of understanding from which future knowledge can develop. In a way, this foundation literacy is no different from the common understanding that the human body is an interconnected system of subsystems that provides the framework for all diagnostic problem solving among medical practitioners.

Why This Publication?

For the past three years the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators have collaborated on a number of projects that address school districts as *single* systems. These have included the series of national workshops on *Total System Collaboration for Site-Based Decision Making*, with Pat Dolan; the development of district vertical team strategies in Iowa and Illinois; and now the development of a joint Total Quality Management initiative.

This essay by Grady McGonagill provides an additional, and essential, facet to our understanding of school systems—one that may explain why so few major education reforms have had lasting effects. For not only is one's understanding of his or her work system distorted by the point from which it is viewed, but one's perception of those working in other parts of the system is also distorted.

The author uses prototypical roles: Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers; describes the distinctive "realities" that each group experiences; and demonstrates how "people in a given role tend to see and be seen by people in other roles in similar—indeed stereotypical—ways. Most importantly, people tend to be oblivious to the effects of their position on their experiences and perceptions."

Educators respond. McGonagill's essay, the core of this publication, is followed by brief responses from educators—pairs of Tops, Middles, and Bottoms. Perhaps it is representative of our own failure to stretch systems thinking quite far enough that we do not have responses from "customers." Having said that, it occurs to us that one way in which this publication might be used is to inform our "customers" about schools as systems and the complexities of changing them.

AASA and NEA are providing this publication to *provoke thought and stimulate dialogue* among, and between, our colleagues in the systems that touch the lives of America's children.

We believe it may provide a different lens through which to view new systemic—and collaborative—solutions to the pervasive conditions that stand between educators and their common purposes.

Lewis A. Rhodes
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INTRODUCTION

The need for radical restructuring of public schooling in the United States is all but taken for granted. International comparisons show that the United States lags significantly behind most other developed countries in achievement levels. Incontrovertible evidence also shows that our schools serve the least well-prepared students poorly. Increasingly, the public sees a link between these results and declining American economic competitiveness.

In response to these concerns, initiatives are underway at the state, district, and building level to rethink the design and delivery of education. These efforts include many pacesetting examples: legislation in Kentucky that essentially recreates a statewide school system emphasizing student outcomes and accountability; a teacher contract in Rochester, New York that trades higher pay for greater accountability; implementation of site-based management in Miami-Dade County, Florida; and innovative building-level reforms in schools such as New York's Central Park East and Indianapolis' Key School.

While no single definition of restructuring has emerged, one sees assumptions and approaches in these sites similar to those that have guided renewal efforts in American industry: emphasis on and accountability for quality results; openness to novel ways of creating those results; and adoption of decision-making procedures close to the delivery of services and involving increased participation of line workers and customers.

Rough road ahead. The momentum such experiments have generated is encouraging. However, a closer look at these examples, and at the sites following their lead, raises doubts about the likelihood that restructuring will meet our increasingly high expectations for schools. While promising innovations are evident in at least some building-initiated efforts, the prospects seem dimmer for meaningful change at a satisfactory pace within larger systems.

For example, Rochester's reputation rests more on a compelling vision of a transformed teacher role than on significant progress in realizing that vision. In Miami-Dade County, where a decision-making process involving parents and teachers operates in most schools, student achievement shows no gains or has actually declined.[1] In these and other sites, inertia and resistance are distinguishing features of the change process. Overall, restructuring initiatives seem to be slow or outright stalled. If restructuring is to justify our hopes and sustain public support, it is critical to pinpoint the barriers to productive change and reflect on how they may be overcome.

What Hinders Restructuring?

Following is an interrelated set of problems common to a number of restructuring efforts:

- **Lack of urgency within school systems.** The greatest barrier to restructuring is the lack of will to undertake it. In view of the public alarm, the relative complacency in most school systems is astounding. Many people deny the problem exists and believe "American education is in trouble, but not my school." In districts where site-based management teams are functioning, active commitment frequently does not extend beyond those teams, which operate in isolation.[2] And even in schools that have elected to participate in a school improvement effort, research indicates that many teachers and administrators do not think that either they or their schools need to change.[3]

- **Lack of partnership in support of restructuring.** In many systems, overt resistance reinforces indifference. Despite dramatic examples of new partnerships between unions and management, this approach appears to be "business as usual" for all too many districts. For example, the administrators' unions in both Miami-Dade County and Rochester opposed the reforms.[4] Teachers' unions have sometimes been supportive.[5] However, such support continues to yield few examples of teacher contracts that substantially expand options for new approaches to teaching and learning.

  The lack of districtwide partnership also plays itself out at the building level. A common feature of restructuring efforts is the creation of teams that consist of teachers, parents, and administrators. Often lacking special training and given only vague guidelines, these teams face the challenge of overcoming historical gaps in communication among the constituencies. Not surprisingly, many teams founder, unsure of their purpose or unable to realize it.[6] And in some instances, they are crippled by conflict that occasionally becomes physical.[7]

- **Lack of strategic direction for restructuring.** Within systems larger than a school, restructuring is necessarily a top-initiated enterprise. Yet, the fate of such initiatives is in the hands of teachers and administrators at the building level who frequently don't fully understand the reform's purpose and aren't involved in articulating and implementing it. District leadership frequently fails to provide the sense of context essential to bring ownership of the goals of the restructuring process.

As a result, the commitment necessary to realize the potential of decentralized decision making is lacking. Moreover, this lack of a clear set of priorities leaves even those committed to reform without guidance for channeling their energy and resources.

- **Lack of "break-the-mold" innovations.** Even where site-based management teams are operating smoothly, there is widespread disappointment with the results. With surprising predictability, school improvement teams don't accept the invitation to petition for waivers from school board policies; their plans don't focus strategically on student outcomes; and those plans depart only marginally from established approaches to teaching and learning. School systems lack visions of a new generation of schools and—contrary to hopes—these visions are not emerging from newly empowered building staff.

These barriers suggest that restructuring efforts may well go the way of previous improvement attempts. In *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*,[8] Seymour Sarason asserts that this is precisely what will happen unless current initiatives avoid earlier pitfalls. In Sarason's view, "the existing 'system' will defeat efforts at reform" unless it takes into account power dynamics among different parts of the system. He is concerned that "teachers, principals, supervisors, curriculum specialists, superintendents, members of boards of education. . .think and perceive in terms of parts and not a complicated system: their parts, their tasks, their problem, their power or lack of it."[9]

UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONS AS SYSTEMS

Each of the four barriers identified earlier can be seen as a consequence of parochial perceptions of people throughout school systems. Thus, the success of restructuring efforts depends significantly on the ability of people in key roles to acquire a perspective that enables them to more accurately interpret and respond to ambiguous messages in their organizational systems.

The Difficulty of Learning From Experience

Sarason's warning comes at a time when writing on organizations reflects an increasing emphasis on a "systems" perspective. For example, in *The Fifth Discipline*, a work widely read in public and private sectors, Peter Senge applies "systems thinking" to organizations, offering it as one of five complementary tools for creating "learning organizations," that is organizations capable of learning from their experience. The dilemma Senge addresses is that people learn best from experience but because of the ambiguous link between cause and effect in complex systems, "we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions."[10]

To manage this dilemma, Senge offers a set of "laws" and "archetypes" of systems thinking. Some are counterintuitive: "the harder you push, the harder the system pushes back." Others—"the easy way out usually leads back in"—are common sense. The essence of systems thinking "lies in a shift of mind: seeing interrelationships, rather than linear cause-effect chains."[11]

Senge observes that most people in organizations are preoccupied with events. A deeper level of explanation lies in detecting the patterns of behavior that underlie the events. But the real payoff of the systems perspective results from recognizing the underlying structures that cause behavior patterns.

Learning disabilities. Mastering systems thinking and creating learning organizations requires a new way of thinking. But Senge is as concerned with what people already know, or think they know, as with what they need to learn. He identifies a half-dozen common mindsets or "learning disabilities" that impede the creation of learning organizations. Two of them are particularly relevant to school systems:

- **I am my position.** People in organizations tend to identify with their particular function and feel no responsibility for the system as a whole.

- **The enemy is out there.** When people identify with their own position and not with the system, they tend to blame others in the system for whatever is not going well. Everyone has a solution for improving the system; unfortunately, it involves someone *else* being fired or doing something different.

These mindsets have powerful implications for educational restructuring. Because people in all positions find it easy to blame others for the system's inadequacies, they see no need for themselves, or even the system as a whole, to change. Poor student performance? The answer is obvious, but varies depending on whom you talk to: "Students aren't adequately prepared"; "Teachers aren't creative"; or "There are too many administrators."

Tunnel vision. Consequently, we do not see how our actions affect people in other positions. When problems arise—such as the role confusions that inevitably accompany the change process—educators and their constituents blame one another rather than engage in constructive problem solving. Most important, they don't learn from this experience because "the most important consequences of their actions occur elsewhere in the system, eventually coming back to create the very problems they blame on others."[12] When entrenched in such mindsets, elements of the system historically at odds with one another, such as teachers and administrators, continue to find ample fodder for maintaining the feud.

Sarason's prescription for the ignorance of power dynamics in school systems places heavy emphasis on a "reallocation of power." The irony is that most restructuring efforts do in fact attempt to redistribute power by moving decision-making authority toward the building level. Yet, the available evidence suggests that power realignments have resulted in scant "empowerment" for teachers.[13]

The Seductiveness of Simple Explanations

The reasons restructuring does not necessarily lead to empowerment are manifold but Senge's perspective provides at least a partial explanation. If people in school systems are impaired by "learning disabilities" that encourage them to disown responsibility, simply redrawing the lines of authority is unlikely to result in previously disempowered people embracing responsibility. Thus, restructuring efforts face a formidable problem; they involve a change process that inevitably requires all members of the system to feel their way together into a new future. If people in systems fall back

on the widespread mindsets of blaming others and suspecting their motives, the prospects for working partnerships are bleak.

These behavior patterns will not come as news to educators. What may be newsworthy is their prevalence throughout all organizations. At least the problem is not unique to education! The truly good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. But knowing how to cope with destructive mindsets requires understanding why people rely on them so readily.

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal provide an explanation based on their work in businesses, schools, and hospitals.[14] They find common pitfalls in the ways managers interpret events in organizations.

Facile answers. Managers routinely make superficial analyses of what is happening, based on an existing—and often impoverished—stock of beliefs, expectations, and assumptions. Like Senge, Bolman and Deal observe that the most commonly cited beliefs blame external forces, either other people or "the bureaucracy." Another common perspective explains problems in terms of others' "thirst for power." Of course, these explanations may fit some situations, but the authors find that these stock explanations are applied far out of proportion to their usefulness, leading to a very limited menu of options.[15]

Why do people in organizations tend to make such superficial diagnoses? Synthesizing a wide body of research, Bolman and Deal suggest the tendency stems from the human need to make sense out of one's experience--a challenging task in organizations where so much is happening. The task is even more challenging in school systems, which are unusually complex organizations. As a result, people need theories to tell them what is important and to organize information into patterns. The problem comes when we rely on inadequate theories.

The Need for System Literacy

Attributing the source of many organizational problems to an impoverished reading of organizational tea leaves, Bolman and Deal implicitly argue that the solution lies in people becoming more "literate" in how organizations function. Pursuing this possibility more explicitly, another systems thinker, Barry Oshry, focuses on "system literacy" as a strategy for enhancing the empowerment of individuals and groups at different levels of an organization.[16]

Personal versus systemic. Oshry argues we enter organizations with the mindset that our interactions with others are "person-to-person" rather than systemic. That is, we attribute our success or failure in dealing with

others to individual characteristics—theirs and our own. This mindset leads to regular and predictable misunderstandings of others' intentions and of how others will interpret our own actions.

Oshry's work is distinctive because it illuminates the various forms system illiteracy takes throughout an organization. This work is particularly useful in thinking through strategies to support restructuring, for it explicitly addresses power dynamics among different levels of an organization. Thus, Oshry makes the link between the systemic effects of differences in power—which Sarason reminds us are typically ignored by educational reform efforts—and the "learning disabilities" that people all too often display when interpreting organizational events.

Critical Roles in Organizations

Using Oshry's explanation, we can understand organizations as systems by looking at the critical roles people play. Like Sarason, Oshry is struck by the predictable outlooks of people in different parts of the system. Like Senge, he believes that structure creates these perceptions and the resulting behavior. However, Oshry zeroes in on a particular kind of structure, namely the "space" one occupies in an organization.

Oshry identifies four prototypical roles: *Tops*, who shape an organization's purpose and strategies; *Bottoms*, who perform the organization's work; *Middles*, who integrate the work of Tops and Bottoms and coordinate the organization's activities; and finally *Customers*, who consume the organization's products and services.

Distinctive "realities." People in each role tend to experience a distinctive "reality," which differs markedly from that of other roles. Put any person in one of these four roles and his experience in that role shapes not only his perceptions but his behavior. As a result, people in a given role tend to see and be seen by people in other roles in similar, stereotypical ways. Most importantly, people tend to be oblivious to the effects of their position on their experiences and perceptions.

People typically have one primary organizational role. In school systems, for example, teachers are primarily Bottoms and superintendents are mainly Tops. However, there are multiple systems within an organization, so most people operate in different roles at different times. Superintendents are Middles between the board and the rest of the system. Teachers are Tops when dealing with aides and students, but they are Middles between principals and students. All are Customers of different parts of the organization when seeking support. Moreover, everyone plays all four roles elsewhere in daily life.

DYNAMICS BETWEEN TOPS AND BOTTOMS IN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Looking closely at the predictable patterns in the interactions of Tops and Bottoms is worthwhile, for no significant educational restructuring is likely to take place without a sense of partnership between them.[17] Tops—the board, superintendent, and cabinet—typically introduce restructuring. Bottoms—especially teachers—are the critical resource in making it work. Neither can succeed without the other.

Pressure at the Top

According to Oshry, Tops, as shapers, experience a world of complexity and responsibility, in which there is too much to do, and too little time. They face an ever-changing environment and conflicting inputs from within and outside the organization. As a result, Tops feel burdened by responsibility. They have a strong sense of being visible, accountable, and at risk. They take failure personally, which leads them to hold onto responsibility and control to survive.

Ambivalent about letting go. Applying this perspective to education, one sees Tops initiating restructuring to cope with a threatening and changing environment, one that calls for dramatically improved results from schools. However, since most restructuring initiatives involve decentralizing decision making, Tops face a dilemma. Their characteristic behavior is to hold onto responsibility, but the reform calls on them to let go of significant elements of that responsibility. The prediction is that, faced with such a choice, Tops will behave ambivalently.

Put anyone in a Top role under these conditions, and although this person will attempt to let go, at critical junctures he or she will tend to step in and take charge as a way of maintaining control of the restructuring agenda. In fact, most site-based management teams in restructuring districts have accumulated a storehouse of anecdotes to support the charge that the central office continues to practice "top-down decision making."

The complexity of the Tops' world, made more burdensome by the reflexive need to maintain control, makes it difficult for them to step back and provide needed vision. Systemic forces, and Tops' automatic responses to them, keep them in a controlling, yet reactive posture.

Vulnerability at the Bottom

By contrast, the world of Bottoms, the producers, tends to be one of vulnerability and a sense of being disregarded. Bottoms typically see many problems in the organization: a lack of inspiration and vision from above, a failure to deliver on the organization's promises, and inadequate resources to do the job.

Bottoms feel Middles and Tops should handle these problems, but observe that they frequently do not. So Bottoms feel frustration, resentment, fear, anger, helplessness, and—ultimately—burnout. They experience a world in which "We" need to protect ourselves against "Them." As a result, they feel oppressed by Tops and Middles and tend to hold "Them" responsible for the situation.

Thus, Bottoms interpret restructuring from a skeptical perspective, inclined to see it as yet another example of "Them" doing it to "Us." Ask any seasoned teacher about his or her experience with major reform initiatives, and you're likely to get a long account of dashed expectations. Teachers (and principals and mid-level administrators, when reacting collectively to the board and cabinet) are vulnerable to taking an instinctive "Blame Them" reaction and converting it into an institutional posture. This posture makes them reluctant to enter into partnerships with their historic antagonist and quick to defect. Sensitive to being exploited, Bottoms are skilled at examining any initiative from the viewpoint of what is being required of them and what they might lose.

Instinctively skeptical. These dispositions, however, are not *personal*, but systemic. What Bottoms see of restructuring from their natural vantage point gives them ample ground for concern. They are being asked to undertake work beyond their primary role in the classroom to help redesign an educational system. In effect, they are being asked to do the traditional work of administrators, often without any additional training—or pay.

Of course, Bottoms will be rewarded with a greater voice in decisions affecting their classrooms. But are they really? To believe so requires trust. When Bottoms see the apparent inconsistency around shared decision making that inevitably emerges as Tops go about implementing restructuring, Bottoms will have a good case to justify their doubts about this new agenda.

Caught in the Middle

Ideally, one would look to Middles, principals and central office personnel below the cabinet level, to bridge the misunderstandings between Tops and Bottoms. Middles, however, tend to be rendered ineffective by

the dynamics of their own world. They are caught in between Top and Bottom. In trying to please both, they often satisfy neither. By allowing themselves to be pulled into the middle, they lose their autonomy and thereby sacrifice the independent perspective that might have enabled them to bring Tops and Bottoms together.

The Enemy Is Us

Thus, Oshry's system perspective goes beyond Senge's "learning disabilities" to help explain why restructuring partnerships between teachers and administrators are difficult to create and sustain. All parties contribute to the impasse; all bear responsibility for overcoming the barriers to partnership.

Barriers to the Labor/Management Partnership

The basic assumption behind restructuring is that schools must operate very differently to achieve needed results. In most school systems, the teachers' contract is the most formidable barrier to restructuring efforts. Designed to protect teachers from exploitation, most contracts also prevent significant deviation from the status quo. As one superintendent, returning from a conference on alternative models of schooling, said, "A number of fascinating ideas were discussed. None of them would be possible here under our existing contract with the teachers' union."

An increasing number of efforts to negotiate contracts in ways not bounded by the adversarial traditions of collective bargaining have had promising results.[18] These initiatives, however, remain isolated exceptions rather than the rule. Such experiments are fragile endeavors, for they must overcome the barrier of system illiteracy to merit any chance of success.

Scenario 1. One district's restructuring experience illustrates the challenge of breaking new ground. The district cabinet and the teachers' union leadership agreed to a day-long facilitated retreat to address barriers to a good relationship and compare their perceptions of the district. A brief survey in advance of the retreat asked participants to identify "current realities or trends in the district that you regard as the most significant." The results were dismaying to both sides.

The cabinet members believed they responded appropriately by identifying "substantive" issues, including the impact of budget cuts, the implications of the growth of a more challenging student population, and inadequate student achievement. One teacher also acknowledged many of the same concerns, but most teachers emphasized concerns regarding district

leadership, such as "paternalism," "lack of connection between central administration and the troops," and "constant 'mistakes' in the personnel office."

The administrators saw the differing perceptions as incontrovertible proof that teachers were incapable of taking a larger view of things—teachers remained fixated on their parochial perceptions and committed to blaming the administration. The teachers, for their part, took greatest notice of one of the lesser concerns of cabinet members—"complacency" in the district and a sense of people being "entitled without earning"—despite administrators' disclaimers that this was not directed exclusively at teachers. The immediate reactions of both sides confirmed their existing, negative mindsets about each other, making it difficult to initiate the search for common ground.

The systemic explanation. A person with system literacy would have been neither surprised nor dismayed at the survey results and their interpretation. People will usually see things from the perspective of their position in the organization. And, they will be disappointed when others don't see things the same way. Tops see the larger complexities for which they are responsible; Bottoms see the shortcomings of the system to which they are vulnerable. For those who have acquired system literacy, the challenge is not to invalidate such perceptions, but to recognize their origin and strive not to take them as the whole reality.

Interaction Among Bottoms

Another feature of Oshry's model is useful in understanding the underlying dynamics between labor and management. In addition to examining the relations among different organizational levels, Oshry explores the interactions within each level. Here, too, there are instinctive—and counterproductive—responses to the "space" in which Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers find themselves. System literacy requires recognizing the automatic responses and substituting empowering ones.

Bottoms, in reaction to their vulnerability within the system, tend to coalesce, forming groups with a great deal of solidarity. Also common is for Bottoms, reacting to their vulnerable position, to fall into defensive patterns of thought and action: differences within the group are suppressed because they appear to threaten unanimity; choices appear to be "either/or" when they are not. Typically, a division into "soft-liners and "hard-liners" evolves within Bottom groups around threatening issues.

Producers and protectors. Oshry finds that "when organizations are undergoing renewal efforts, this Soft/Hard differentiation among workers

takes the form of Producers (Softs) versus the Protectors (Hards). The Producers want to support the change effort; the Protectors resist it."[19] Producers feel their best course of action is to help the organization survive, thereby taking care of themselves. Protectors feel they are best served by securing the best contractual arrangements, letting the organization take care of itself. In the popular perception—with substantial basis in reality—teachers' unions have traditionally focused only on "protecting."[20]

Awareness of this perspective opens up some useful possibilities for Bottoms and Tops. For Bottoms, the lesson is that "producing" and "protecting" are not mutually exclusive approaches. Indeed, each is risky by itself. The "produce" strategy alone serves the organization at the expense of the worker. The "protect" strategy by itself undergirds workers' short-term security while risking the viability of the organization—an implication increasingly relevant to schools in light of the emerging popularity of giving customers "choice" over which schools they attend. Strategies that include both are likely to be more effective.

For Tops, the lesson lies in recognizing the internal ambivalence of Bottoms around these issues and the tendency to present one face or the other. The mistake would be to conclude, when confronted with a "protect" posture from a union, that this constitutes the extent of its members' concerns. Tops will do well to recognize that the more committed they are to protecting the perceived interests of union members, the easier it will be for union leaders to relax their posture and acknowledge their latent support for "producing" in support of the restructuring agenda. Partnership is possible only when both sides are committed to producing and protecting.

How Site-Based Management Teams Stay Stuck

Scenario 2. When restructuring efforts do get launched, they often get stuck. Building-based teams take enormous time, yet often don't generate the results that inspired the restructuring. This is a serious problem, for if restructuring efforts are to generate dramatically improved student outcomes, schools must create learning environments that shift current paradigms.

If buildings are empowered to take the lead, then creative efforts must emerge from site-based planning teams. But the annual goal statements that emerge from school improvement efforts typically have two chronic deficiencies: the proposed activities are rarely linked to student achievement, and they seldom challenge the basic elements of established practice.

Understanding the disappointing performance of site-based teams involves looking at a dance that has emerged between teams and the central office in many districts. This dance illustrates the ways in which Tops and Bottoms find it difficult to work together:

> The central office declares that decision making will shift to the buildings through the mechanism of site-based management teams. Usually, guidelines are suggestive rather than comprehensive and specific. In response, teams often feel that they lack sufficient clarity to function effectively. This inhibits them from undertaking bold initiatives because they are not sure about the scope of their authority. They fear being slapped down by the central office after investing scarce time in a new proposal.
>
> From the perspective of the central office, things may not be perfectly clear, but it's hard to be perfectly clear at the outset. Superintendents look to the experience and perspective of the teams to provide input on what the guidelines should be, often saying, "Let us know if a policy gets in your way and we'll consider removing it." Yet, team responses frequently echo complaints heard on site-based management teams in Rochester during the late 1980s, "Why doesn't the superintendent just tell us what he wants?"
>
> Superintendents throw up their hands in despair at such apparent unwillingness to take initiative and risks. Trying to loosen constraints, they feel they are being asked to impose more of them. For their part, site-based management teams throw up their hands in disgust at the unwillingness of the central office to sort out the confusion by providing clear direction and guidelines. They see an abdication of responsibility, a seemingly deliberate strategy of creating conditions in which site-based management will fail.

In this scenario, Tops, true to Oshry's predictions, blame Bottoms for not taking the initiative. And Bottoms blame Tops for not providing clarity and direction. Both are right. And both need to do something different to transform this scenario into a workable partnership at the building level.

CHALLENGES FOR TOPS AND BOTTOMS

Generating Shared Districtwide Goals

When Bottoms predictably criticize Tops for not providing sufficient direction and vision, they often have an excellent case. Site-based management teams typically lack an overarching district or state framework that would support them in articulating ambitious initiatives directly linked to core learning goals.

The absence of such a framework is *not* a matter of a lack of goal statements. Most boards have mission and goals statements, which they periodically renew. One board member in a restructuring district, after hearing about a perceived "lack of focus" and "unclear goals," indignantly pulled out a copy of the district's annual calendar, which contained the board's goals. "There they are!" he said, waving what was apparently the only evidence of their use.

Rather, what is lacking is a set of goals that 1) declare high aspirations for all students' learning, 2) emerge from a participatory process, and 3) form the basis of how the system allocates its resources and monitors its own performance. Most district and state goal statements typically do not express commitment to setting and attaining high educational standards for all students. Therefore, they fail to make clear the fundamental rationale for decentralized decision making. Teachers and principals in one restructuring district reported that they had come to control the budget simply because "the superintendent wanted it that way." Regarding participation, most goal statements are generated by some combination of board and central office staff, without involving building-level staff. As a result, those people have little basis for commitment to the broader restructuring agenda. And finally, goal statements rarely become an operational force within the district.

A district goal statement can enhance the creativity of site-based management teams by encouraging them to focus on key learning goals, by inspiring them to set high standards, and by serving as a touchstone for evaluating the team's annual plans. A goal statement used in this way also helps people at all levels focus their energies so they may choose among the many potentially interesting things to do and direct the limited resources of the system toward the fundamental goals of restructuring.

Many Tops, like the board member with his calendar, do not see their own contribution to the lack of vision and direction that Bottoms experience. After all, they may well have a sense of mission themselves, perhaps even a sense of their priorities. Unable or disinclined to adopt the Bottoms' perspective, Tops don't see the legitimate reasons why Bottoms might be reluctant to share in the responsibility for what has historically been "their" problem, or why Bottoms might be unable to acquire quickly the skills and knowledge to capitalize on their newly expanded roles. Thus, Tops overlook their own complicity in the disappointing results from site-based management teams.

Taking Initiative and Risks

Bottoms need vision, new knowledge, and skills—and help from Tops in acquiring them—to take advantage of their new roles. However, while Bottoms are often justified in blaming Tops for not providing overall focus and adequate support, Bottoms often fail to recognize the legitimate barriers Tops face. Putting out fires long enough to communicate a clear direction is truly challenging. Moreover, Bottoms, because of their instinctively reactive posture, usually fail to exploit the loopholes left open by Tops' lack of clarity.

More basically, Bottoms fail to take the initiative when they could and hesitate to take risks when they must. When participating in site-based management teams, as in collective bargaining negotiations, Bottoms readily fall into a "protect" rather than "produce" mindset, looking for guarantees rather than opportunities. As a result, in many schools shifting to site-based management, opportunities for exercising leadership and taking responsibility go begging. The comforts of solidarity make Bottoms particularly reluctant to take a stand when it means disagreeing with—or worse, confronting—other Bottoms.

How Tops and Bottoms Collude in Maintaining Old Roles

Scenario 3. After engaging in site-based management and shared decision making for several years, a public school system considered whether to become a pilot site in the dissemination of an innovative instructional approach. The attractions for doing so were considerable: a substantial body of research attested to the effectiveness of the methods, and external sources would provide most of the funds. The resulting experience illustrates how mutually reinforcing negative perceptions easily become self-fulfilling, with any new frustration being interpreted to fit precast mindsets.

Consistent with site-based management philosophy, the superintendent invited the district's elementary schools to decide whether they were interested in participating. Half of the schools decided in favor, half against. By the time these decisions had been made, the superintendent learned that each participating school must be paired with another school in the district for comparison. He therefore asked the several nonparticipating schools—the only possible candidates—to serve this function, which involved some classroom observation by outside researchers and extra paperwork.

Tops intervene. Although many site-based management teams had doubts about participating in this way, only one school resisted outright. To the dismay of the superintendent, the team convened a referendum on this question, and the faculty voted no. The superintendent, feeling that the benefits to the district significantly overrode the reasons given for not wanting to be the control school, and seeing the vote as inappropriate, overruled the faculty and mandated the program.

To the faculty, this mandate became a clear example of top-down, contradictory behavior by the central office. "Why did they ask us if we wanted to participate if we ultimately had no choice?" From the superintendent's point of view, schools *were* given a choice regarding substantive participation and half chose to go along. The requirement for control schools became apparent, he insisted, only late in the negotiations.

Thus, despite the superintendent's wish for building-level participation, he faced the dilemma of trading off the commitment and enthusiasm of several schools for full-scale participation—and the resulting benefits to students—against the one school's reluctance to serve as control. Why, he reasoned, should he let a single school's unwillingness to perform minor obligations effectively veto the whole project?

Tops often are surprised and defensive at criticisms of top-down management. From their point of view, some top-down interventions are necessary to protect the overall well-being of the district. And they are surely right. The problem is not that Tops make some selected, strategic, top-down decisions. Rather, it is that they often fail to provide a context for those decisions that would help shape others' interpretations. Moreover, Tops tend not to anticipate and acknowledge the probability that the pressures of their role will lead them to make some top-down decisions that are more automatic than strategic.

In the absence of a more compelling and specific basis for interpreting Tops' behavior, Bottoms and others in the system will rely on system stereotypes, such as "Tops need to control." Tops fail to see that not only have they not provided clear guidelines for decision making—they often know

this and will defend it—but they have not set expectations, nor provided forums, for managing the resulting ambiguity. This failure is particularly critical in areas with districtwide impact where Tops are likely to feel the legitimate need for control, such as hiring or defining and assessing student outcomes.

Bottoms suspect. For their part, Bottoms often appear relieved when Tops behave in a top-down fashion. Bottoms are predisposed to be skeptical. They suspect a hidden agenda behind restructuring and believe that Tops are not sincere about the new rhetoric. When Tops do make decisions that contradict the rhetoric of site-based management and shared decision making, Bottoms find confirmation of their suspicions.

Again, it is not that Bottoms do not correctly perceive reality. In many restructuring examples, Tops *do* behave in ways that are apparently at variance with site-based management. Where Bottoms contribute to a negative and self-sustaining dynamic is in letting an automatic set of lenses blur their ability to see Tops' behavior in context.

In this scenario, Bottoms found it difficult to believe that the superintendent had made a good faith effort to allow participation, had been surprised by the requirement for control sites, and had in fact managed a difficult dilemma in a way that arguably served the overall interests of the district. Giving benefit of the doubt goes against systemic pressures.

Instead, Bottoms draw a negative conclusion about Tops' intentions (in this case the superintendent, a person with a history and reputation of integrity in the district, was rumored to be "lying" about having heard about the requirements late in the game) and then withhold that conclusion so that Tops do not learn they are being negatively judged and have no chance to make their perspective known.

A Lesson for Tops and Bottoms

The superintendent in scenario 3, however well-meaning, appears to have behaved inconsistently regarding site-based management. A strategy focused on empowering schools would have given ownership of the problem to people at the building level. But from the superintendent's point of view, he did try to involve teachers in the resolution of the problem. An implementation team—composed of principals, teachers, and a curriculum coordinator—had been created to oversee the adoption of the innovation.

When the need for control schools became known, the superintendent first met with this team, explained the problem, and asked the teachers

on the team to discuss the situation with their colleagues in the buildings that did not want to participate in the program, but were now needed as control schools. The teachers declined. From their point of view, the superintendent had "refused to own his part in the...problem. He wasn't clearing it up. He wanted [the teachers] to clear it up, that is, talk to the other teachers and tell them they were spoiling it for us."

One reason the teachers insisted that the superintendent continue to take responsibility for the problem was the view that the situation was his fault because he did not explicitly state in advance that some schools might be required to participate in less than a full way. Moreover, the teachers were uncomfortable approaching their colleagues in a manner that would appear to align themselves with the administration.

The superintendent's conclusion? "Many people are in favor of site-based management when it's convenient, but they aren't when it's not." This type of experience encourages the superintendent to conclude that resistance to new roles and responsibilities at the building level will require central decisions.

Of course, one can still question the superintendent's approach. Apparently, he saw the problem as his and simply tried to get the teachers to share it with him. Given this orientation, it was easy for them to continue to follow the pattern of "we give input, you take action"—the old paradigm.

What if the superintendent had really given them the problem? To do so would have required him to be willing to accept the consequences of their being unwilling to act on it, or unable to act on it in a way that led to satisfactory results from his perspective. He would have risked losing the innovative program, a risk at which many a Top would balk. Had he done so, however, the Bottoms would have had to take responsibility for their decision. By attempting to share rather than delegate the problem, the superintendent made it easy for the teachers to disown it.

At the same time, the teachers colluded with the superintendent to keep the roles intact. They chose to blame him for not knowing something he apparently had no way of knowing, and for not being clear in advance about the decision-making rules in a unique situation. This posture provided a comforting rationale for their instinctive—and systemic—aversion to owning the problem.

A familiar scenario. Both sides are unable to break out of deeply established roles and behavior patterns. The superintendent cannot "let go" or even see that he is not letting go. Teachers do not see that they are encouraging the Top to hold on, and that they are using their instinctive

need to hold Tops responsible as a rationale for doing so. For each side to break the power of these historic roles, they would need to have the occasion, the disposition, and the skills to engage in a dialogue in which each comes to appreciate fully the others' perspective and recognizes the "mental models" each reflexively brings to the situation.[21] All too often, they lack all three.

THE CHALLENGE TO ALL: DEVELOP SYSTEM LITERACY

Scenarios such as the ones reviewed earlier are among the most significant impediments to restructuring. The most remarkable thing about them is there's no bad guy, no bad group. Put an otherwise reasonable person in the role of Top or Bottom (or Middle or Customer), and he or she's likely to have the perceptions—and produce the behavior—that goes along with the role.

But we want to find a bad guy because the consequences are so negative. And we usually do. In the example of the innovative program, both sides have a case; yet, neither side is able to see the others' perspective as anything other than self-serving. And both sides have taken one step further away from the partnership each needs to make the system work. Although the example is unique, the phenomenon is common and highly predictable. No set of site-based management guidelines is likely to provide clear instructions for the ambiguous situations that routinely occur in schools.

Consequences of System Illiteracy

When interpreting behavior in such ambiguous areas, people who lack system literacy will regularly fall back on their standard stock of interpretations. Since Tops have historically held onto responsibility and made top-down decisions, this serves as the template for continuing to understand their behavior. And since Bottoms have traditionally blamed others and avoided taking responsibility beyond their immediate job, Tops have a ready explanation for unwelcome criticisms of their behavior. Similarly, management and labor are disposed to come to the table with fixed and negative mindsets about one another and will therefore behave in ways that—filtered through the lens of their mindsets—confirm the preconceptions.

These dynamics constitute strong systemic forces that sustain distrust and conflict between Tops and Bottoms. Add in the roles of Middle and Customer, which this analysis has largely ignored for the sake of simplicity, and you have a recipe for ongoing "warfare" throughout the system. From any single vantage point, other people are not doing what they should be doing, and there just isn't enough leverage to get the system to do what it needs to do.

Enmeshed in the system, people see only events, or at best the underlying patterns of behavior, without seeing the impact of the underlying

structure. They interpret these events and patterns in personal terms, oblivious to the tenth law of systems dynamics: "there is no blame:. . . systems thinking shows us that there is no outside; that you and the cause of your problems are part of a single system. The cure lies in your relationship with your 'enemy.' "[22] Thus, scarce energy goes into fighting enemies rather than resolving role confusion, defining outcomes, experimenting with new assessment procedures, and undertaking the many other challenging tasks of creating new educational structures.

Through the lens of a systems perspective, we see a pattern in restructuring efforts where essentially automatic perceptions and behavior override the sincere efforts of all people to move toward new relationships. Ignorance of system dynamics—of the structures that shape behavior—leaves people blind to their own role in creating the organizational gridlock.

Breaking the cycle of reacting and blaming requires, first, system literacy an awareness of the underlying dynamics. Second, it requires a humble and wholehearted commitment to being creative rather than reactive, to adopting a new stance, free from the old mindsets and open to discovering the new behavior that is appropriate. Third, it requires the willingness to take risks.

Tops need to think—and occasionally publicly say—something like this:

> To achieve the results our present system is incapable of producing, I'm committed to a fundamental shift of responsibility to empower people in the buildings to discover and implement the new strategies that are needed. I don't know what that will look like; we'll need to figure it out together. I do know there will be confusion around roles, because in some areas there will continue to be a need for centralized decisions. I have no doubt there will be times when you perceive me to be behaving inconsistently with the philosophy of site-based management and shared decision making. When you do, please call it to my attention. In some instances, it will be a problem of appearance, which I can clear up. In others, it will be an instance where we have legitimately different views of what is appropriate, which we will need to talk about. And in still others, you will be right, and I will miss an opportunity to learn unless you point it out. If we're candid with one another about our concerns as we go forward, and committed to working through our differences in good faith, then I think we may wind up in a place where we can deliver on our goals for children.

And Bottoms need to think—and occasionally say to one another—something like this:

> We have doubts about some of the motives behind all this restructuring rhetoric, and about whether "they" will live up to their part of it. But the potential payoff for kids is too great for us not to give it our full support. We risk being burned one more time, but better that than to have missed an opportunity to create conditions that enable the kind of learning we've always dreamed about. It would be easy to opt out by pointing to past inconsistencies in leadership. But that would leave us with the status quo. Let's take the risk and see what we can do to create a new system. This means we'll need to learn how to open up a dialogue amongst ourselves and with others on how best to achieve the results we want. And it may mean we'll have to learn how to hold one another accountable for those results. At the same time, let's not be naive. When we see contradictions, let's point them out. If restructuring appears to threaten our legitimate interests, let's stick up for them. And let's recognize that it will be tempting to fall back on the safety of blame and suspicion; we'll need to help one another avoid the seduction of giving back the responsibility that we have so long been denied.

If people throughout school systems were to approach the task of restructuring with mindsets such as these, they might help one another discover appropriate behavior for a restructured educational system. The superintendent in the anecdote might learn, for example, how he could have empowered the implementation team to own the problem—or learn the source of his unwillingness to let them do so. Teachers on the implementation team might come to recognize the mindsets that kept them from being willing to take a position that risked putting them in conflict with their colleagues. And, in the scenario 1, members of the cabinet and leaders of the teachers' union might learn to recognize—and see beyond—their predictable mindsets about one another.

Strategies for Overcoming the Barriers to Partnerships

What can be done to interrupt these automatic and predictable systemic interactions? Following are some suggestions based on systemic change

efforts in the private sector, as well as experiences of states and districts in the vanguard of sustaining their restructuring efforts.

- **Use Strategic Planning To Initiate or Reinvigorate Restructuring.** If different parts of a school system are to work together, they must share a common definition of the problem and work together on its solution. To initiate a restructuring effort with broad support, management must create a process of taking stock and setting goals that involves representatives of key constituencies within and outside the district. This means including leadership of the teachers' union, the administrators' union, and possibly other collective bargaining units. It also means involving not only parents, but representatives of the business community. Such a process forges a nucleus of key people who have an opportunity to work closely with one another and overcome systemic stereotypes. It also enables the district to integrate restructuring with other initiatives, so that restructuring does not appear as simply another "add on" to a myriad of existing initiatives.

- **Transform Collective Bargaining Through New Skills and Perspectives.** While a planning process provides a good basis for improved management-labor relations, it is only a start. Contracts with teachers—and to a lesser extent administrators—are powerful constraints to restructuring learning. If collective bargaining is left to its own momentum, the established rituals of antagonistic positional bargaining will continue undaunted by the banner of restructuring. A small number of districts have paved the way for a truly new partnership by creating the opportunity for board members, administrators, and teachers to learn new approaches together. Typically, this involves a multiday retreat in which key actors from each constituency come together for training in the procedures of conflict management and "win/win" bargaining. Occasionally it involves direct assistance in the collective bargaining process.[23]

- **Create Vehicles for Enhancing System Understanding.** A well designed strategic planning process serves indirectly as a means of fostering communication and understanding for a select group of people. However, forums and channels need to be created that reach a larger number of a school system's members. Among the applications of Oshry's perspective are the orchestration of system "Times-out-of-Time" in which members of an entire organization—or a cross section—are

brought together, seated by role group, and invited to give their perspective on what the system is undergoing. Possible structural solutions include regular meetings between central office representatives and chairs of site-based management teams, or actual central office membership on site-based management teams.

- **Provide Training in System Literacy.** People in school systems need help understanding the predictable dynamics among different parts of the system. This understanding would enable them to avoid the characteristic pitfalls of their own role. And it would give them skills in understanding people in other roles and understanding how their own actions appear to others. Oshry, Senge, Bolman and Deal, and others have designed organizational simulations and exercises that foster system literacy.

- **Provide Training in the Skills of Collaborative Dialogue.** Restructuring calls on school personnel to learn together under extraordinary conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity. Their chances of success would be enhanced by skill development in putting forth ideas in ways that encourage others to put forth theirs, and by the ability to discover and explore the "mental models" underlying one another's views. The key actors in restructuring, such as site-based management team members and the superintendent's cabinet, would do well to support their efforts to work together through training in such skills.

- **Focus on the Customer.** The mindsets documented by Senge and Bolman and Deal, and the attitudes and behavior identified by Oshry, illustrate how organizations can get so distracted by internal misunderstandings and disputes that they are unable to sustain a focus on ultimate purposes, such as serving their customers. This suggests an enormous value in following the lead of an increasing number of private sector organizations by elevating customer service to the position of an overriding priority through Total Quality Management. TQM provides an integrating framework for mobilizing the different parts of the system. It also provides a vehicle for opening up communication between the public and school systems.

Conclusion

Efforts to restructure education are not likely to succeed without partnership among people at all levels of the system. Yet the experience of many districts points to a formidable barrier to such partnerships: the human tendency to make sense of organizations in ways that are "illiterate." By overlooking system dynamics, we fail to see that the reality we experience, and the attitudes and actions to which we are prone, is directly shaped by the pressures of our particular role. Thus, actors in all parts of school systems undergoing change are blind to the possibility that the pervasive mistrust and unproductive conflict they experience—which they are inclined to attribute to the incompetence or ill will of others—is at least a partial consequence of their own reflexive perceptions and reactions.

By contrast, when we view our dealings with others in light of systemic forces—with "system literacy"—we are more likely to create conditions of mutual trust and collaboration by seeing and interpreting ambiguous events from others' perspectives, giving appropriate benefit of the doubt, and responding in ways that take into account others' realities and interests. Such habits of perception and behavior are a critical resource to educators—and their clientele—in forging and sustaining the partnerships required by restructuring.

ENDNOTES

1. *Education Week*, April 3, 1991. Declines in student achievement also have been reported in some California schools by Gary Lichtenstein, Milbrey McLaughlin, and Jennifer Knudsen, in "Teacher Empowerment and Professional Knowledge." Stanford University: Unpublished manuscript, Feb. 1991.
2. Muncey and McQuillan, "Some Observations on the Possibility of Major Restructuring in American Schools: An Ethnographic Perspective." Working Paper #3. School Ethnography Project, Brown University. April 1991, pp. 20–22.
3. Muncey and McQuillan found this to be true of most of the schools in a study of sites participating in the Coalition for Effective Schools, Ibid, p. 6.
4. The administrators' union in Miami-Dade County, Florida, took out an ad in *Education Week* expressing its opposition to site-based management (April 3, 1991).
5. For example, the teachers' union in Miami-Dade County took out an ad in response to the administrators' union, supporting site-based management (*Education Week*, May 29, 1991).
6. *Education Week*, June 12, 1991, p. 26.
7. "Politics trips up Chicago school revolution: management of public schools by parent-led councils suffers from bureaucratic problems and political infighting." Isabel Wickerson, *The New York Times*, June 30, 1991, p. 1.
8. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.
9. Ibid, p. 24.
10. Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990, p. 23.
11. Ibid, p. 73.
12. Ibid, p. 51.
13. Lichtenstein, et al., op. cit.
14. Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal. *Reframing Organizations*. Jossey-Bass, 1991.
15. Ibid, pp. 25–38.
16. Barry Oshry, *The Possibilities of Organization*. Boston, Mass.: Power & Systems, Inc. 1986.
17. Jerome Rosow, Robert Zager, et al. *Allies in Educational Reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.
18. Rosow and Zager, op. cit.
19. Barry Oshry, *Space Work*. Boston, Mass.: Power & Systems, Inc. 1991. p. 41.

20. Of course, viewed from within, teachers unions are also stratified into levels. To many teachers, union leaders are simply another set of Tops.
21. Peter Senge, op. cit., summarizing the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, argues for the need for powerful communication skills as a means of discovering and reflecting on our "mental models."
22. Senge, op. cit., p. 67.
23. Edward Dougherty and Laval Wilson, "The Making of a Contract for Educational Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1990, pp. 791–796.

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Had Grady McGonagill come to our district and studied the systemic forces and interactions that occur regularly and predictably, he could not have described them with more accuracy than he did in his paper. I found his remarks insightful, penetrating, and remarkably stimulating in my effort as a struggling Top to self-evaluate and redefine deeply established roles and patterns of behavior. McGonagill's paper offered some comfort to me with the knowledge "there are no bad guys," but it also raised considerable doubt from this Top that substantive systemic changes could or would occur any time soon. While offering hope and direction, McGonagill heightened my feelings that the potential for change and improvement is fragile indeed, especially if school reform efforts do not emphasize organizational environments where the various parts of the system can work harmoniously on solutions to problems.

All school leaders can learn from McGonagill's paper. Whether one is a Top, Middle, or Bottom, the overriding focus is to shift the attention away from roles, mindsets, preconceptions, and interpersonal leadership and on to something else. To this Top, that "something else" has to do with the language of culture, beliefs, purpose, and reasons for our existence. Until consensus is reached on these fundamental issues, reform and restructuring will occur only when some Top, or some producing Middle or Bottom causes them to thrive.

Call them beliefs, norms, assumptions, core values, or outcomes, why not accept the result that, without them, we will continue to manage by ambiguity and continue the warfare so common within educational organizations? Without them, we will continue to abide by our deeply established and embedded roles and patterns of behavior, seeking continuously to validate the accuracy of our negative and destructive preconceptions. Like it or not, McGonagill's "system illiteracy" has settled like dry rot into many of our educational institutions and eats away at much good timber.

McGonagill is on-target again with his assertions that inertia and resistance are the distinguishing features of the educational change process. The potential we have for restructuring has remained essentially that—potential. Part of the problem, as I believe McGonagill implies, is that we have been carefully and meticulously taught a lot of things that just aren't so. The process of unlearning and discarding old habits and mindsets is more time-consuming and painful than learning the new. And, relative success in the past is the greatest impediment to success in the future.

In the final analysis, only people can and will manage themselves. In this Top's opinion, McGonagill has accurately pinpointed the systemic barriers to productive change in the educational enterprise. I am hopeful, at the minimum, that Tops, Middles, and Bottoms can agree we are not producing a quality product, and neither of the levels in the organization has an edge on the wisdom needed to challenge

and change the basic elements of established practice. The least any level can do is commit to continuous opportunities to learn about and from each other. McGonagill provides a context within which learning and understanding can occur. In the end, nothing satisfies more than to be associated with a quality process and a quality product. To accept anything less may threaten our very existence.

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I am interested in Grady McGonagill's criticism of school districts and restructuring activities where student achievement has shown no gain and where student outcomes are not focused strategically. My question to him would be, "What *are* the important measurable student achievements or outcomes?"

I feel his criticisms of the system give us outcomes that will benefit society and, in turn, cause a focus on restructuring. Those outcomes include creating conditions of mutual trust and collaboration by seeing and interpreting ambiguous events from others' perspectives, giving appropriate benefits of the doubt, and responding in ways that take into account others' realities and interests. Although he is critical of site-based decision making and other activities that would lead to these outcomes, I believe he may not understand that in order to have people become more "literate" (from Bolman, Deal, and Oshry) in the functioning organizations, they need to be taught from a very early time in their own families and in their schools exactly the skills that will help all of us be better equipped to empower individuals and groups at different levels of an organization.

McGonagill refers to Seymour Sarason's book, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*. Again, it appears to me that what Sarason is calling for is a complete change in the way classrooms are structured. This is the most critical "system."

Sarason contends that in the scores of recommendations for educational reform, no question is ever raised about question-asking behavior in the classroom. He argues, "If the regularities of the classroom remain unexamined and unchanged, the failure of the reforms is guaranteed." I think Sarason, in his attempt to change the system literacy of a classroom, is getting closer to the idea of why we are looking at restructuring and renewal. Skills, knowledge, analysis, and evaluation are at different levels now. The mission of our public schools has changed.

If we believe that one of the most effective ways of learning is through modeling, we need to look at the way schools are structured, not only for the adults in them, but also for the way instruction takes place in the classroom. My perception is that one of the challenges we face in this era of education is that we have adults and teachers who are engaging in exactly the same learning process as

the children with whom they are working. This may not be detrimental at all, for what we can do is demonstrate that learning is a lifelong process, and that what we do need are the skills to figure things out, to ask questions, to problem solve, to make decisions based on alternatives and options.

I think it is ultimately important that we keep in mind the purpose for restructuring and renewal, and I do support McGonagill's feeling that we do not have the skills as a group of people to break the cycle of reacting and blaming. He points out that we will need an awareness of the underlying systems at the knowledge level. We also will require a commitment to being creative, to looking at new stances, and to freeing ourselves from old mindsets. We also will need to develop places that make it safe to take risks. These are values and actions that need to prevail throughout the system, that start certainly at the classroom level. If there is no change in the classroom, if we do not teach to these outcomes, then we will certainly not make the changes in our society that will help us build the kind of future we are seeking.

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While some people may see Grady McGonagill's treatise as only a theoretical framework for school restructuring, much of his work actually highlights the barriers we face in our attempts on a daily basis. Two areas of the treatise have particular meaning as we attempt school restructuring in Greece, New York.

In his introduction, McGonagill cites four problems he sees as common to many restructuring efforts: the lack of a sense of urgency within a school system, the lack of partnership in support of restructuring, the lack of strategic direction for restructuring, and the lack of "break-the-mold" innovations. As we look at our efforts in Greece, we find ourselves making progress in dealing with these problems. Increasingly, our staff recognizes the need for change in order to improve student success. At a district level, it is no longer "business as usual" between the district and the association. We have made significant strides to work as partners instead of adversaries in all aspects of our relationship, not just in the area of restructuring.

The district is committed to strategic direction for all phases of school operations. To accomplish this commitment, the district established a vertical team charged with developing a plan to help each employee understand the district's mission, beliefs, and values—as well as his or her role in that mission—by using total quality management principles.

With the reopening of West Ridge School in 1990, the opening of a new elementary school and a new middle school in 1993, and the total restructuring of a middle school into a 6-12 school in 1993, we believe we are striving to incorporate "break-the-mold" innovations into our schools. That is not to say that innovations are not happening in our schools now. But incorporating innovation is much easier when these efforts are planned by staff truly committed to the vision and principles of that school, and before any students enter the school.

While we feel there have been significant changes in our schools, we recognize we are still a long way from meeting the expectations of all for a restructured school system. Identification, however, of the problems is not enough. We must become much more willing to deal with the barriers to these problems. In this aspect, I find the description of roles, behaviors, and perceptions of groups within an organization as seen by Barry Oshry to be extremely accurate, and valuable knowledge for everyone.

Win/win methods. I agree that individuals need a better understanding of each role and an awareness that we all play each role at different times. For the most part, Oshry's model is important in helping everyone better understand the dynamics in not only the labor/management relationship, but also in all relationships, and the barriers to those relationships. I do not fully agree, however, with the notion that the contract with teachers is one of the greatest barriers. In Greece, we no longer use the traditional adversarial methods of bargaining and problem solving, but instead use the ideas of principled bargaining and "win/win" solutions. Our contract provides a means by which almost any innovation can be tried if it has the full support of the staff in the building. No longer do we look at the contract as a document that prevents us from doing something innovative. We now try to focus on the idea, "Why not try?"

For me, it interesting to note that the idea of Tops and Bottoms can sometimes be more difficult a relationship to understand when viewed within a teachers' association, than between the district and the association. Oshry's soft/hard differentiation is an issue with which we in Greece are struggling with and trying to find a reasonable balance. We are trying to help all our members see that our activities can be directed to support change, and protect individual rights. This partnership within an association may be more critical to long-lasting school restructuring then most of us are willing to acknowledge and deal with. For this reason alone, this treatise becomes an important document for all teachers to read and understand.

McGonagill's strategies for overcoming the barriers validate many of the efforts in Greece to make more systemic changes in our operations. We realize that only with systematic and systemic changes will we be truly successful in our efforts at school restructuring. I am anxious for every staff member in Greece to have the opportunity to read McGonagill's treatise and react to it. Discussion by all roles—Tops, Bottoms, Middles, and Customers—can only lead to a greater level of trust, probably the most difficult barrier to true restructuring.

Tom King, Ph.D., Superintendent
Ravenna City, Ohio, School District

Grady McGonagill's paper is truly an intellectual treatise replete with a myriad of well-researched educational theories and theorists. My first perusal gave me feelings of inadequacies. My second perusal gave me cause to feel a little better when I realized I was one of the Tops about which Oshry spoke. On my third and final reading, I said to myself, "I understand this stuff now. . . I live with it every day!"

In short, I found McGonagill's piece intellectually challenging, full of many truths, and worth reading on three different occasions. Reacting to his treatises, however, soon produced a humbling effect as I quickly concluded I either had to agree with the theories and theorists, or postulate a few of my own. Of course, I chose the latter!

With that in mind, the reader needs to realize that "restructuring" is not new: it is merely relabeled. In fact, our nation is blessed with an unlimited supply of "educanese" labels. To become an expert in the field of education, one must display a certain expertise in selecting the correct "educanese" label of the week. Then, and only then, is one ready to examine and/or define the structure, personnel, programs, and problems within any educational setting.

For nearly 25 years, I feel I have played a part in "restructuring" those educational settings in which I have worked. Throughout those same two-plus decades, I have become more and more convinced, however, that "It's really not all that important what you call it, as what you do with it!"

We never have or ever will run out of education experts. As long as we seek their expertise, we also must grin and bear their inability and propensity to label everything educational.

Therefore, not that I consider myself an expert, but only because I understand my own labels, I offer the following when attempting to "restructure" any organization, including schools: Create a warm, safe, and trusting environment where staff are not only permitted, but ecouraged to "TRY ON A CHANGE" to see if they like it.

SYNERGETIC TEAMING is a concept in which I have believed and tried to practice for 25 years. In simpler terms, "You can accomplish almost anything if you don't care who gets the credit!"

Call it what you will, but if it is a "doable," get it done!

Tim Cleary, Principal
Tower Street School
Westerly, Rhode Island

Do we need to understand organizations and the traditional roles played by members of those organizations? If we truly understand and accept each person's role in the organization as he or she perceives it, does that "reality" then allow the members of the organization to move forward in restructuring efforts? Is "system literacy" the golden key that unlocks the magic kingdom of restructuring? If these are the questions, then training, strategic planning, collaborative dialogue, trust, and focus seem to be the answers. Yet, even in the most enlightened districts where trust exists, win/win bargaining occurs, shared decision making empowers all in planning and implementating initiatives, professional development programs flourish, and collaborative dialogue is the norm, we still have community referenda, budget shortfalls, personnel issues, and negative public responses to the simplest of educational changes derailing the restructuring train.

Maybe focusing on organizational concepts, seeking understanding of organizational meanderings, and considering power dynamics of organizational interactions may not be the appropriate concern. The "baby step" growth occurring in our educational institutions (and they are institutions!) may well be too little, too late. Restructuring, renewal, reform, relearning—one gets the feeling it's REgurgitation of '70s jargon with '90s slick copy.

The challenge for education is not to REorganize itself, but rather to recognize itself as a community bounded by its own limits. Our education community (not organization) has a more pressing need for a bold, new, and creative paradigm of learning that flows in substantially different directions from what exists. Today's education system is an industrial dinosaur looking for industrial solutions to industrial problems in industrial organizations of the 1900s. Will we move to the 21st century with vision or restructured rhetoric?

Individual perceptions limit change. Understanding each other's traditional roles as each perceives his or her role to be, will produce at best, just that—understanding of each other's perceived traditional role. System literacy challenges us to recognize and accept why people in organizations act the way they do. The true reality is as long as there are roles for people to fill, the person filling each will have a unique perception of what that role is. When challenged to change, that perception will be the insulation that will limit the change and, very likely, stagnate the system most in need of change.

Will system literacy make bargaining better? Assist in program restructuring? Build partnerships? In most instances, it seems "system literacy" should assist in moving an educational organization's restructuring efforts. The roadblocks will be many and the journey will be slow. Is this enough to grow an education system that will make our society globally competitive? Will "system literacy" cause an educational organization to become an integral and interactive component of a social community of learners? McGonagill's treatise is logical and valid, and yet "it just doesn't seem to feed the bulldog!"

But what, you ask, might feed this bulldog? Let us move from therapy (massaging our leaders and followers) to action—enabling, not just empowering, all professionals to practice, perform, and assess actions. Give teachers and learners the tools and training to experiment and take risks in the practice of education. Develop measurements to validate successes. Identify growth through risks; the methods that work and the methods that don't are all actions necessary for an organization to grow and develop.

To spend time discovering who we are individually and collectively, in the hope that we will better understand how to deal with each other, is not nearly enough action. A community of learners must have the latitude to act and the expertise to evaluate those actions. We would be far better served by focusing on a community of learners that are practicing the profession of education, than on a group of traditional "leaders" institutionalizing their roles through group therapy workshops.

Phil Tetzloff, President
Marshalltown, Iowa, Education Association

Grady McGonagill draws on research and current writings in school restructuring to develop a rationale for improving the effort of leaders to restructure local schools. He calls for all participants in the local district to develop "system literacy." McGonagill makes the case that each participant in school restructuring holds perspectives about other participants that constitute a mindset and are the function of the "space" they hold in the school organization.

McGonagill describes some characteristics of selected mindsets of people in roles or "spaces" in the school system as Tops, Middles, and Bottoms. He also makes clear that all of us hold all of those roles in our daily lives. In any given "space," however, our mindset is colored by the pervasive view held by most others in that space. Hence, the "I am my position" barrier to being open to other perspectives. Another common mindset or barrier is, "They are the enemy." The author indicates that the mindset of people in "spaces" is a function of being in that space, and the mindset changes as a person changes "spaces."

Leaders in school district restructuring may identify with McGonagill's description of "spaces," typical role positions of educators and behavior scenarios of those in the listed role positions. Others may react to the hierarchical names of "spaces" as used by the author. However, nearly everyone involved in school restructuring will have the opportunity to reflect on his or her experiences in the light of knowing more about "system literacy."

The Learning Laboratory project in Marshalltown has been directed toward all the stakeholders in our district becoming actively involved in shared decision making. During the past three years, one of the problems our district experienced was

related to a smaller budget. Important state legislation that passed has changed our bargaining process and our funding formula. Budget problems seem to make all of the stakeholders in our system anxious.

Reflecting on the comments and behaviors of Bottoms, Middles, and Tops in our district, McGonagill's theory applies, as we worked to solve problems related to fewer funds for district programs and services. He has identified characteristics of each group that become evident in times of stress. Tops need to take decisive actions; Bottoms need to blame and take care of business as it is or was; and Middles are messengers of bad news and ideas, no matter what is said. For awhile representatives of various groups presented and cared only for their views, which reflected roles and positions in our system. This was consistent with the author's theory.

I perceived the stakeholders' action in our district to solve these related problems to be deliberate and beyond the traditional views held by each group. Trust among groups that we can work together for solutions and do a better job for students and ourselves is greater than before shared decision making was initiated. Many leaders, both within and across groups, are more willing to share ideas, solutions, and responsibilities.

Finally, I perceive that many professionals, as well as parents and community members, realize that the best solutions to our problems are the ones developed and implemented in our district. I am interested in the author's idea of "system literacy," and how it can help us understand our training and work in building a learning organization.

About the Author

Grady McGonagill, Ed.D., is president of McGonagill & Associates, a small organizational consulting and management firm dedicated to helping organizations achieve high performance through improved leadership and teamwork. He is an experienced consultant and trainer whose clients include: corporations such as Aetna Life & Casualty, Kodak, and Johnson & Johnson; public agencies such as the New York State Board of Regents and the federal Administration for Children and Families; and nonprofit agencies such as Amnesty International and Oxfam, as well as other organizations in North and South America.

McGonagill also has worked in education from many vantage points. At the federal level, he was a program officer at the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education and a research manager at the National Institute of Education. McGonagill has consulted with state boards and departments of education in Arkansas, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, and Rhode Island. Locally, he has assisted many schools, central offices, and school boards. In addition, McGonagill has consulted to comprehensive renewal efforts such as the National Alliance for Restructuring Education and the New Hampshire Alliance for Effective Schools.

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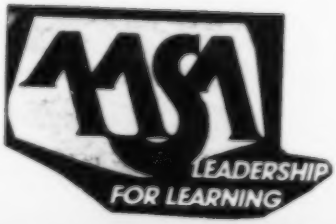

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